

The making of Marion Barry, Part 1: A DC mayor's activist beginnings in the South

By Rick Massimo, WTOP – November 5, 2018

This is the first part of WTOP's three-part series "The making of Marion Barry," marking the 40th anniversary of the first election of the man referred to as D.C.'s "Mayor for Life."

WASHINGTON — Seemingly every successful political campaign says it ran a different kind of campaign. But Marion Barry's first campaign for mayor of D.C., which reached its ultimate goal 40 years ago this week, reflected a change in how the District governed itself and saw itself.

Barry wasn't D.C.'s first black mayor, nor was he the first mayor the District's voters picked for themselves under home rule. His predecessor, Walter Washington, held both of those distinctions. But Barry's election, made virtually certain when he unseated Washington and vaulted over Council Chairman Sterling Tucker in the September Democratic primary, was both a cause and a result of the District coming into full flower as an independent and black-run city.

Vincent Gray, a member of the D.C. Council and a former mayor himself, told WTOP that he remembered Barry as "a phenomenal force."

"Marion Barry really is known, not as the first mayor, but [as] the one who stepped out," Gray added.

"Marion's election was a breath of fresh air," said Absalom Jordan, a member of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission for Ward 8, who knew Barry for decades.

It came "as D.C. was transitioning and getting a footing of what it meant to be a predominantly African-American-controlled city," Denise Rolark Barnes, publisher of the Washington Informer, told WTOP. "A person who

was very clear about who he was and his blackness, so to say, was what folks in the District were looking for.”

Not by much: In the three-way primary race, Barry won by only 1,356 votes over Tucker and 2,979 over Washington. But he was on the way; he won the general election with 70 percent of the vote over black Republican Arthur Fletcher. He would win the next two mayoral elections, in 1982 and 1986, as well.

Barry had only lived in the District 13 years when he was elected, and he didn’t seem like the mayoral type when he arrived: “The champion of the street dudes” is how fellow activist Courtland Cox remembered him — a dashiki-wearing orator who spoke casually of the possibility of getting “beat to death” by the police and who was arrested multiple times in D.C.

But Barry could move between “the suites and the streets,” as veteran reporter Tom Sherwood described it, to create the signature jobs program Pride Inc., which created jobs for at-risk youth and ex-offenders. He eventually put on a suit, ran for the School Board and the D.C. Council and in both places talked about holding the line on taxes.

In the process, he demonstrated an acuity for the budget process that might have surprised those who didn’t know he was a dissertation short of a Ph.D. Observers say he demonstrated what the activism of the 1960s could move into as the decade changed.

“He was one of those civil rights leaders who recognized that in order to make real change he had to become a part of the system he’d been fighting against,” Gray said. “And he converted himself from being outside, working to effectuate change, to being somebody who was inside having the authority and the opportunity to make change. And he made a lot of change.”

Barry’s method of campaigning was heavily influenced by his work in the civil rights movement, and it was likely the only way to get past two heavily favored candidates. In the process, he built a very different coalition than had come before: heavy support from white voters in Wards 2 and 3, and from a gay and lesbian community that he energized politically for the first time in city history.

That was a voter base very different from the one he relied on later in his career, in the process laying the groundwork for the personal affection people had for him that carried through the difficulties he got himself into.

The popular image of Barry is dominated by his legal troubles, and not without reason. He was convicted of drug possession in 1990, assault in 2000 and tax avoidance in 2005, and crack was discovered in his car in 2002. But he remained politically viable through it all, returning to the mayor's office after his drug conviction in 1994, and to the D.C. Council in 1992 and 2004.

In 1998, after Barry announced he wouldn't run for a fifth term as mayor, Sam Smith, editor of the *Progressive Review*, who had been covering him for more than 20 years, wrote, "The best way I can describe it is, it's like going out into a field and seeing an old rusting-out hulk of a car and trying to imagine what it was like when it was brand-new. What people are seeing now is that corroded shell of what Barry was, and if you don't remember that [brand-new car], it's very hard to see."

To understand the District of Columbia, one must understand Marion Barry.

— The Washington Post

Barry had at least two political rebirths in his career, depending on how you're counting, and a lot of people outside the District — and inside — saw them as cult-of-personality triumphs by a hopelessly corrupt leader with the help of the followers he'd bought off or mystified.

But "To understand the District of Columbia," The Washington Post once wrote, "one must understand Marion Barry." And a look at the election of 1978 goes a long way to explaining the bond the mayor had with the city, which lasted until his death in 2014.

'Larger than life'

Albert Beveridge, who helped him with a legal challenge that cleared the way for his first election, told the Marion Barry 1978 Campaign Oral History Project at the George Washington University's Gelman Library that

“Marion Barry was larger than life, even before he became mayor.”
Ivanhoe Donaldson, his 1978 campaign manager, told the GW project Barry began to run for mayor of D.C. “the day he was born.”

Marion Barry was born in Itta Bena, Mississippi, about 15 miles from Greenwood, in 1936. He told the Oral History Project of McComb (Mississippi) High School in 2011 that his parents were sharecroppers and they lived in a shotgun house with no electricity or indoor plumbing. Before he was old enough to go to school, his mother would take him into the fields while she worked.

Then, Barry went to a one-room schoolhouse with one teacher for 40 kids. “I don’t remember learning very much,” he said.

Mainly, he would watch the Greyhound bus go by on the way to Chicago, and wish “we were on that bus, getting the hell out of there.” He noticed early on that white students got to ride a school bus, but he had to walk.

When he was 8 years old, his mother moved the family to Memphis, Tennessee, later remarrying. The story is that Barry’s father died when he was 4, but in his autobiography he said his mother took the family away from a father who was not quite abusive but overly controlling. “I only told people [my father had died] later on in high school to avoid the shame of not having my father in my life anymore.”

He wrote that his mother worked as a domestic for white women in Arkansas, “but she had a rule where she always insisted that she go in through the front door and not through the back. She told them to call her by her last name, Ms. Barry. ... My mother earned her respect and showed me how to earn it.”

Barry faced discrimination early: In his memoir, he said, he and several other black Memphis paperboys hit the sales quota that would earn them a trip to New Orleans. The paper wouldn’t let them go, citing the extra expense of a separate bus for the black paperboys, which the segregated city of New Orleans would require. Barry boycotted his route; he and the others were eventually rewarded with a trip to St. Louis instead. He’d also drink from whites-only fountains and go to the Memphis Zoo on whites-only days, and in college walked out of a Draft Board hearing when a white chairman called him “boy.”

'Nobody was protesting'

In 1958, as a senior at LeMoyne-Owen College, the NAACP (of which Barry was LeMoyne chapter president) sued Memphis over segregated seating on the city buses. A white man on the LeMoyne board “said some negative things about black folks in his argument to the court,” remarks Barry found “condescending,” he told the McComb students. He wrote to the president of the college asking for the board member to resign or apologize. Eventually, the letter was published on the front page of the Memphis Commercial Appeal.

“Nobody was protesting,” Barry told the students; “nobody was raising hell. People were accepting that segregated situation because white people had conditioned us to accept that.”

The next day, the LeMoyne president — a black man — called Barry “an embarrassment to the college” and said he had to dismiss him. It was three weeks before graduation. “I said no, you’re not going to dismiss me,” Barry remembered. “We’ll close this college down.”

He wasn’t dismissed — the president “thought it was better to get rid of me,” Barry wrote later. He graduated, and in 1960, he was working on a master’s in chemistry at Fisk University when he helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and, as its first chairman, began spending more and more time at sit-ins, marches and demonstrations, including some of the first sit-ins at lunch counters in Memphis. He continued his activism when he began working on a Ph.D. in chemistry, first from Kansas University and then from the University of Tennessee.

What use was getting an education if you couldn’t get a job, or vote, teach where you wanted to teach, or live where you wanted to live?

— Marion Barry

Students, he explained in his book, had the most to gain from civil rights: “What use was getting an education if you couldn’t get a job, or vote, teach where you wanted to teach, or live where you wanted to live?” Eventually, his civil rights work took over from his academics, and Barry

devoted himself to the movement full-time. He completed all his doctorate course work but never wrote his dissertation.

Soon he was sent back to Mississippi — to McComb, city in the south of the state of about 12,000 located 30 miles south of Jackson and 180 miles south of Itta Bena, to organize.

One of the organization's trademark methods, Barry remembered, was for members to stay in the houses of local families. That gave them the kind of connection that could come in handy in the face of a backlash from white local police, and also formed a bond of understanding.

“You don’t understand the conditions until you really are in the conditions, and seeing people live the way they do,” Barry told the McComb High School students nearly 50 years later. “You never get it until you get it right up here — right in your front door. When you’ve got to live it, and you see the hurt, see the pain, see the tiredness.”

That way of creating a bond would come in handy when his political career began.

Barry worked with SNCC in New York for a few months before being sent to D.C. in 1965. He was dispatched “to raise funds, not hell,” Milton Coleman wrote in *The Washington Post* decades later. But, that didn’t last long.

The making of Marion Barry, Part 2: Street activist to power player

By Rick Massimo, WTOP – November 6, 2018

This is the second part of WTOP's three-part series "The making of Marion Barry," marking the 40th anniversary of the first election of the man referred to as D.C.'s "Mayor for Life."

WASHINGTON — In 1950, the U.S. Census found that 64.6 percent of the population of D.C. was white and 35 percent black; in 1960, it was 45.2 percent white, 53.9 percent black.

By the time future Mayor Marion Barry arrived in Washington in 1965, the city was 66 percent black. But, the president of the Board of Commissioners, a three-member executive board appointed by the U.S. president — and the closest thing D.C. had to a mayor — was white. Virtually all of D.C.'s police officers and firefighters were white.

The House and Senate committees that made the laws for the District were overwhelmingly white and Southern — John McMillan, a Democrat from South Carolina who headed the House District Committee for 24 years, once mailed Mayor Walter Washington a watermelon, calling it "a letter from home."

"In 1964," Barry wrote, "if you were heading down South from New York and sitting in the front section of the train, you would get up and move to the back section once you reached Washington. But, if you were coming from the South and headed North, you would start out in the back section of the train and move to the front once you got to Washington."

By January 1966, Barry was organizing a bus boycott — he called it a "mancott" — in D.C., protesting a 5-cent fare hike. The increase was rescinded the next day. It was the first victory for Barry's "Free DC"

movement, an attempt at organizing the black population and creating genuine home rule.

Speaking to the Marion Barry 1978 Mayoral Campaign Oral History Project at the George Washington University's Gelman Library, Max Berry, who became the finance chair of Barry's 1978 campaign, remembered his first impression: Barry would stand in the park in a dashiki "speaking to anybody who would speak to him. It was almost like London in Hyde Park, only he wasn't crazy or anything; he was just talking about the District. ... I was immediately sort of impressed because I thought I was going to get ... the wild guy to try to sell me something ridiculous, and I could tell he was a man of intelligence, even though he looked a little funny to start with."

And Barry made waves. After the 1968 uprising in D.C. in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Barry said, "White people should be allowed to come back only if the majority of the ownership is in the hands of blacks. That is, they should come back and give their experience and their expertise — and, then, they should leave."

After the 1969 moon landing, he wondered out loud, "Why should black rejoice when two white Americans land on the moon when white America's money and technology have not even reached" the inner city.

But, even by then, Barry had left the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was beginning to associate with a more radical activism. In 1967, he launched the first version of a program whose legacy would follow him the rest of his life: the jobs program Pride Inc.

Pride Inc.

"How does one begin to measure dignity and hope?" Barry says in an old piece of film used in the documentary "The Nine Lives of Marion Barry."

Pride Inc., which Barry organized with his then-wife Mary Treadwell, as well as local activists Carroll Harvey and "Catfish" Mayfield, gave jobs to young people and to adults, the latter group often including ex-offenders. It also showed the range of Barry's political and communications skills. It was funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, as Barry worked with Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz.

One of those kids was Gerald Bruce Lee, an Anacostia kid who, in 1967, got a Pride Inc. job sweeping streets.

“It changed everything,” he told WTOP. “I learned leadership; I learned how to work ... It opened up a lot of doors and windows of opportunity. ...”

“And, the beauty of it was we were cleaning up our own communities. We were working and earning funds that we could take home. ... You go into a community where there’s trash and dirt, and you clean it up. And, it looked good. And, you felt pride in it,” Lee said.

By 1969, Pride Inc. was connected with American University, and students could get help with applications and interviews at various colleges. Lee and several of his friends were admitted to American before they’d finished high school.

“For most of us in that group, we had never thought about college,” he said.

The truth is, it not just changed my generation, but my son’s and my grandson’s generation.

— Gerald Bruce Lee, retired federal judge

Lee went to his first college class – “baseball caps cocked to the sides, sunglasses” – and remembered thinking, “My mother told me that people who went to college had to be really smart. And, I sat there and listened, and ... I heard the teacher say something, and I thought, ‘I was thinking that.’”

His eyes opened to even more possibilities. “They picked us up at the corner of 16th and U Street ... and drove us up Massachusetts Avenue. As I was riding up Massachusetts Avenue, I saw manicured lawns and fountains. [I asked] ‘Is this somebody’s house? Is this Washington?’ They said, ‘Yes, this is Washington, D.C.’”

Lee retired last year as a district judge for the Eastern District of Virginia. “I don’t think American University would have looked at me, coming from Southeast, were it not for Pride,” he said.

Pride also worked with ex-offenders, including those who were driven by drug problems. They got counseling and training, and some of them went back to crime. But, more succeeded, Lee said.

“Who wanted to take the ex-offenders? Well, Pride did. We embraced them. We knew they were part of our family and our community,” he said.

Lee had a supervisor who earned his high school diploma at the prison in Lorton, went to college with the help of Pride, and helped others do the same. Other Pride workers, including ex-offenders, were trained in professions such as computer science and accounting.

“The truth is, it not just changed my generation, but my son’s and my grandson’s generation,” Lee said. Barry and Treadwell “were determined to show that there was talent in our community that just needed an opportunity.”

From defendant to the D.C. Council

Even then, Barry was being arrested by the D.C. police on charges such as jaywalking and ripping up a parking ticket. But, it wasn’t long before Barry began looking at ways to accrue more power and make more changes in the District.

In 1972, as part of the gradual implementation of home rule, the D.C. School Board was the highest office that D.C. voters could choose directly. Barry ran for the presidency of the board and won. In 1974 and 1976, he won and kept an at-large seat on the D.C. Council.

“It was exciting to us,” Lee said. “The idea that the Marion we knew ... wanted to go inside was huge. ... It was an exciting time to see that someone we knew, who cared about the community, who cared about us, was going to become a member of the school board.”

In 1964, if you were heading down South from New York and sitting in the front section of the train, you would get up and move to the back section once you reached Washington. But, if you were coming from the South and headed North, you would start out in the back section of the train and move to the front once you got to Washington.

— Marion Barry

On the council, Barry was chairman of the Committee on Finance and Revenue, where he combined his activism with his head for numbers.

“You had to be able to count,” former Washington Post writer Milton Coleman told the GW project. “And, folks always felt black folks can’t count.”

In a report issued during the summer of 1975, Barry wrote, “Every time the District is faced with a financial bind, the same tired ‘solutions’ are trotted out: more income taxes, bigger sales taxes, increased property taxes. Perhaps our city administrators figure that the taxpayer is so dispirited that s/he can tolerate anything.”

He also called for a commuter tax, arguing that “nearly every major city in the nation has a nonresident income tax and every single state, which has an income tax, has the authority to tax nonresident income earned outside its boundaries. Yet, in the District, we are forced by Congress into a situation where we must subsidize suburbia by imposing ever higher tax rates on District residents and businesses.” (There is still no commuter tax in the District.)

At the same time, Barry continued to operate as an activist. Richard Maulsby, the founder of the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, D.C.’s oldest gay Democratic association, told the GW project, “I can remember [Council President] Sterling Tucker slinking into a Gay Pride Day event when it was down at the Lambda Rising [book store] on R Street, like 6 o’clock, after everybody had left. But, Marion was there in the middle of the whole thing, giving a speech, rousing people up, working the audience. I mean, there just wasn’t anybody like him on the City Council.”

It wasn’t long before people were thinking of him as a potential mayor. A stroke of fate in 1977 raised his profile even higher.

The shooting

On March 9, 1977, a dozen gunmen from the Hanafi Muslim sect stormed the headquarters of B'nai B'rith International, near 17th Street and Rhode Island Avenue in Northwest; the Islamic Center of Washington, on Massachusetts Avenue; and, finally, the District Building (now known as the Wilson Building) in downtown. They took 149 hostages for 38 hours, and in the takeover of the District Building, killed security guard Mack Cantrell and 24-year-old WHUR reporter Maurice Williams.

Barry was wounded in the gunfire — it wasn't a serious injury, but a shotgun pellet had lodged an inch or so from his heart. His former executive assistant, Patricia Seldon, told the GW project that firefighters put a ladder to a fifth-floor window, strapped Barry to a stretcher and hoisted him down to a waiting ambulance.

"I can still see that picture in my mind, because he was strapped onto this ladder ... and he was waving to people. ... I think the next day, the picture in the paper was him waving, and strapped some kind of way."

Then, in January 1978, Barry announced his candidacy. But, with the sitting Mayor Walter Washington and Council Chairman Sterling Tucker standing between him and the Democratic nomination, it looked like a long shot.

Barry wrote, "I learned early on during my civil rights activism that dangerous events can either slow you down or speed you up."

He claimed that supporters started to put together a campaign organization "without me really knowing or asking," and that may be true, but Sterling Tucker, the D.C. Council chairman whom Barry beat in the primary, recalled, "Oh, Marion came to the council [and] we knew Marion was starting to run for mayor."

Delano Lewis, who worked for the C&P Telephone Company, went on to become president and CEO of National Public Radio and later served as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of South Africa, told the GW oral history project: "I got a call from Marion, and he said, 'Del, I'm going to run for mayor, and I want you to help.' And I said, 'Why do you want to do that? You just got shot in the District Building.' He said, 'That's the reason.'"

“He said, ‘I might not be around. That’s why I want to run.’”

The making of Marion Barry, Part 3: ‘There was no way we could win’

By Rick Massimo, WTOP – November 7, 2018

This is the final part of WTOP’s three-part series “The making of Marion Barry,” marking the 40th anniversary of the first election of the man referred to as D.C.’s “Mayor for Life.”

WASHINGTON — When Marion Barry began to run for mayor of D.C. in 1978, he could point to his record on the D.C. Board of Education and the D.C. Council, where he had been chairman of the Finance and Revenue Committee and had proposed more than a few innovative ideas for bringing more money into the District while holding the line on taxes.

Still, in the September Democratic primary, he’d be up against the incumbent mayor, Walter Washington, and council Chairman Sterling Tucker.

Vincent Gray, a member of the D.C. Council and a former mayor, told WTOP that as the executive director of the nonprofit now known as The Arc in 1978, he wasn’t directly involved with politics, but the bruising race was impossible to ignore.

“How could you not pay close attention to such a competitive race?” Gray said.

Barry spent the primary campaign talking about the “bumbling and stumbling” of the Washington administration, and promising a dynamic, forthright leadership for the District.

I think Marion believed that, as black folks, we can do better.

— Former Washington Post writer Milton Coleman

“I’m pretty certain that Marion and Ivanhoe [Donaldson, Barry’s campaign manager] had respect for the Walter Washington generation, for what they had done,” former Washington Post writer Milton Coleman told the Marion Barry 1978 Mayoral Campaign Oral History Project at the George Washington University’s Gelman Library.

“It was no easy task for Walter Washington to do what he did. But, to steal a phrase from Barack Obama, I think Marion believed that, as black folks, we can do better. ... And that was, I think, the tenor of the time,” Coleman said.

Veteran journalist Tom Sherwood, who has covered D.C. politics for years and co-authored with Harry Jaffe the essential history “Dream City,” told WTOP, “The ‘60s were an amazing time of discomfort and demands that things had to be better. And that moved on into the ‘70s. ... There was less tolerance about getting along and going along. Power doesn’t give up easily — you have to confront power. That’s what Barry was able to do.”

A pocket full of change

Barry wouldn’t have won a battle of resumes, observers remembered, and his opponents each had some well-established voting blocs. He had to do something different, and he did: He built a coalition that reflected the city D.C. was coming to be.

Operating out of an old fur store on G Street downtown, the Barry campaign ran with the passion and energy of people who didn’t know they were underdogs, led by a candidate who campaigned for mayor the same way he worked in the civil rights movement: Being among people and talking face-to-face.

Barry’s widow, Cora Masters Barry, told the GW project, “Marion would go and do a lot of meet-and-greets. It would be 10, maybe 15 people at the most in a place. He’d go in people’s basements and their backyard. ...”

“That was the kind of campaigner he was. I mean, I would just pick people off the street — ‘What’s your number? Would you like to speak to Marion Barry?’ And I’d say, ‘I just met this person at the bus stop. I want you to call them.’ Some people don’t understand. That’s worth 10, 15, 20 votes.”

It's been said that Barry kept a pocket full of change and couldn't pass a pay phone without reaching out with a few phone calls, from the endless list of numbers he kept in his head. LaToya Foster, who worked for Barry and is now the spokeswoman for Mayor Muriel Bowser, knew Barry in the cellphone era, but could vouch for his memory — "Even days before his death, the number of anyone he wanted to reach, he could give you off the top of his head."

The coalition

"There was no passion anywhere but in our campaign," Loraine Bennett, Barry's Ward 1 coordinator in 1978, told the GW project.

Lucille Knowles, a volunteer on the 1978 campaign, said it wasn't an "it's not my job" kind of campaign. King agreed, telling WTOP, "Everybody did everything. If something needed to be done, somebody did it."

By the end of Barry's life, in 2014, it might have been hard to believe that the decisive factors in the race would be white voters, gay voters and the backing of The Washington Post, but those who saw the campaign unfold remember that that's exactly how it shook out.

And, though Barry had long moved from street-level activism to working within the system, the grassroots campaigning skills he'd developed in his civil rights days helped him develop the coalition that put him over the top.

"Our mantra was that we were running to help the least, the lost and the left out," King said. "And all of that was what he talked about wherever he went."

That message resonated with people all over D.C., even with voters who might not be expected to back Barry — and who didn't in later years.

The Washington Post

On Aug. 30, 1978, The Washington Post — the voice of establishment, white D.C. — shockingly endorsed Barry, the former street activist, for mayor of D.C.

While praising Tucker's qualifications, the paper placed more weight on Barry's "energy, nerve, initiative, toughness of mind, an active concern for

people in distress.” They said he would bring to the mayor’s office a “genuinely bold, alive commitment to actually making things happen, and a critically important belief that things can be done.”

... there was really something special about him, about the times, generally, and about that moment for this city.

— Kwame Holman

The paper foreshadowed some of the problems in Barry’s mayoralty by conceding, “True, he would bring a certain sense of adventure to City Hall — which means that there is a certain risk involved.”

Still, the endorsement was a galvanizing moment. Speaking to the GW project, Knowles called it “a real point where it looked kind of possible that he could actually win.”

Sherwood called the Post endorsement “crucial ... particularly [for] the white communities.” And, it wasn’t the only editorial the Post ran supporting Barry in the last weeks of the campaign.

“He was definitely the candidate of the white precincts in that first election,” King recalled to WTOP.

“The ‘78 campaign, and the terrific support we got from the white community, was based on [the belief that], ‘It’s time for us to take control of our fate, and this is the guy who’s going to make a significant difference.’ And, he did.”

Kwame Holman, Barry’s driver during the campaign and, later, the political and congressional correspondent for “The PBS NewsHour,” told the GW project: “Marion would walk into a fundraiser in Ward 3 and light up in the room in the same way he would in any other ward. And again, this was what made you feel and understand that there was really something special about him, about the times, generally, and about that moment for this city.”

Sherwood explained that white voters backed the most activist black candidate in the campaign because some of the issues he brought up transcended race.

“The white vote in the District of Columbia is a liberal white vote,” Sherwood told WTOP. “ ... And the white people are politically attuned, both to national and local issues. The civil rights movement was a moral imperative; Barry represented that — the chance to have black people run the city government like never before.”

The gay vote

Near the end of Barry’s life, he came out against a marriage-equality bill in the D.C. Council, citing opposition from the African-American religious community. But, he had been a supporter of gay rights throughout his career, and in 1978, he used the instincts he’d developed in the civil rights movement to court D.C.’s gay community for the first time.

“The civil rights movement ... is a matter of coalition-building — getting people who have common interests to overcome their common disagreements,” Sherwood said. “And, that’s what Barry would do. He was looking for every vote he could get.”

Activist Richard Maulsby, the founder of the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, D.C.’s gay Democratic organization, told the Barry oral history project that not only Barry but allies Ivanhoe Donaldson and Courtland Cox “all [came] out of SNCC, of course. I mean, they all got it. They saw the parallel between what we were trying to do and what they had done with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and so there was a real simpatico there. ...”

“He supported gay pride resolutions on the [D.C.] Council,” Maulsby added. “I mean, he was just far and away the leader. And, others came after him. Because of what he did, it was easier for other people to do that.”

They held fundraisers for Barry, as well as staffing the phone banks and stuffing envelopes, Maulsby said. “During those hot summer months leading to the September primary ... most of the people who worked the phone bank at night were people from the gay community.”

King recalled that people respected Barry's sincerity because he made his support for civil rights clear wherever he went.

"My women friends were very impressed that when they went to see Marion talk [at a general-audience event], he was talking about gay rights and women's rights, just as he did at a women's luncheon," King said. "His agenda was his agenda."

In the three-way race, each candidate was accused of being a spoiler who would split this or that segment of the vote and throw the election. In Barry's case, he was charged with splitting black people's support with Tucker, thus ensuring a Washington win.

Just weeks before the Sept. 12 primary, Barry was asked to meet with Tucker and other D.C. political figures late on a Saturday night. He feared that the real intent of the meeting was to pressure him to drop out. The newspapers picked up the story, and it redounded badly for Tucker.

In the end, the gap between first and third was less than 3,000 votes. There was a recount. But, Barry emerged as the Democratic nominee and would later cruise to victory in the general election on Nov. 7, 1978.

"There was no way we could win," Betty King said — "except we did."

Epilogue

King gave credit to campaign manager Ivanhoe Donaldson, calling him "a remarkable strategist." She recalled Donaldson coming to her house about a month before the election and saying, "What we are going to do is, we're going to win Wards 1, 2, 3 and 6. We're not going to disgrace ourselves in 4 and 5, and we'll do what we can in 7 and 8.' And, that's exactly what happened."

"I had learned something, which to this day affects my view of politics on every level," Coleman told the GW project. "The way you win an election is, you don't declare yourself a candidate and go out and make your pitch and get people to come over to your side. ... You declare yourself a candidate, you identify your people, and you get them to the polls. And, you don't worry about the other people."

King told the GW project that the day after the primary, the pollster from The Washington Post came to see Barry to ask how he'd pulled it off, and how the Post's polling had gotten the race wrong.

"Marion said, 'You were polling habitual voters, and we got the nonhabitual voters to vote and we got new people to register,' and that was what made the difference," King said.

In the general election, Barry beat Republican Arthur Fletcher with about 70 percent of the vote. On Jan. 2, 1979, he was sworn in by Thurgood Marshall, the first black Supreme Court justice.

Barry, of course, made national news in 1990 when he was arrested after being caught on video smoking crack and fondling a woman who was not his wife in a D.C. hotel room. There had been rumors for years about drug use and adultery. Several members of his administrations, including Donaldson, were convicted of corruption charges. When Barry returned to the mayor's office, Congress stripped the office of much of its financial powers.

But, observers told WTOP that while those factors complicated Barry's legacy, the District has been changed for the better for Barry's having been mayor, especially in his first term.

[He] recognized that in order to make real change, he had to become a part of the system he'd been fighting against. ... And, he made a lot of change.

— Former D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray

For one thing, he made the government of the city look like the city.

Before home rule, many of the bureaucrats in the D.C. government didn't even live in the District — the city was run by federal officials like a program of the federal government, and Sherwood recalled the suburbs being referred to as "the 10th Ward."

Gerald Bruce Lee, the Pride Inc. kid from Anacostia High who became a federal judge, said, “Young people use the word ‘woke’ – he was woke in the ‘60s. ... He made businesses in the city recognize that there was economic power in the people who lived in the city ... and that people who were spending money at Hechinger’s deserved a store at Benning Road and H Street. ... That people who were buying their groceries at Giant deserved a chance to work at Giant.”

Barry also created a government version of Pride Inc. — a summer-jobs program that sought to provide a job for any young person who wanted one. It continues to this day, and current D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser recently renamed it the Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program.

“It’s amazing, the number of people in this city who say, ‘I got my first job from Marion Barry,’” Gray said. “And, it’s amazing and it’s well deserved that he was remembered that way.”

It also created a durable political base for Barry — one that stuck with him through his personal and political troubles.

“He said things that people were afraid to discuss, in a real-person manner,” Foster said. “People felt he was there for them.”

Barry died in 2014, but his work continued to bear fruit, including most recently the D.C. Fatherhood Initiative, Foster said. And, a statue of Barry stands outside the Wilson Building, formerly the District Building.

“It’s important to remember Marion for who he really was,” Gray said. “So many people want to define him [by] the foibles he had as a human being. That’s not really Marion. That wasn’t him. What he did was to try to uplift people — to get them to a different place. And, there are so many people today who are in a better and different place because he was a leader and he lived.”